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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000518

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/05/2017
TAGS: PGOV PHUM ASEC BA POL HUMRIT
SUBJECT: ALLEGED BEATING PROMPTS HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH REQUEST
FOR INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION

REF: MANAMA 0476

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary

¶1. (C) Two Shia Bahrainis were reportedly beaten by security personnel following their detention at a May 21 rally. The families of both men tried to locate them but were not informed of their whereabouts until May 29, when they were invited to visit the men at the Bahrain Defense Force hospital. In a statement to the press, a Ministry of Interior official said that one of the injured men was hurt by a fall to the ground and stones thrown by protesters. Human Rights Watch issued an open letter May 31 calling on King Hamad to form an independent committee to investigate the incident. Human rights and political activists expressed their belief that security personnel have a new policy of using increased force against demonstrators. Separating fact from fiction is difficult in a case like this, but the lack of transparency from the government and the eight-day incommunicado detention raise legitimate questions. End Summary.

Two Protesters Reportedly Beaten

¶2. (U) According to press reports and a statement by Human Rights Watch, two Shia Bahrainis, Ali Saeed Al Khabaz (age 22) and Hameed Yousif Ahmed (age 46), were beaten by Bahraini security forces following their detention at an illegal demonstration on May 21 in the village of Sanabis. A photo said to be of Al Khabaz shows swelling and bruising on his face and head. Ahmed is reportedly suffering from a broken jaw and other injuries.

¶3. (U) The two were picked up by riot police the night of May 21 in Sanabis following a rally protesting police intervention in a demonstration the night before (reftel). According to family members, the two were beaten by police at the site of the protest and in nearby locations after their detention. The families of both men tried unsuccessfully to locate them at hospitals and police stations, and on May 29 Interior Ministry officials informed the families that they were being held at the Bahrain Defense Force hospital. Al Khabaz's family visited both men the same day. On May 30, the Ministry prohibited any further visits and late that night moved them to the Manama police station. According to a May 30 report in Al Wasat newspaper, an Interior Ministry official said that a fall to the ground caused Al Khabaz's injuries. He is said to have resisted arrest and suffered injuries from stones thrown by protesters. The spokesman

said the police had not treated Al Khabaz inhumanely.

¶4. (U) Human Rights Watch Executive Director for the Middle East and North Africa division Sarah Leah Whitson issued an open letter to King Hamad May 31 recounting the events and urging the formation of an independent counsel or commission to investigate "allegations of severe beating, possibly amounting to torture" by police. Deputy Middle East Director Joe Stork was quoted in a separate AP article saying, "Bahrain's response will show whether King Hamad's promises of human rights reforms and rule of law have any meaning." All aspects of the story, including the Human Rights Watch letter, feature prominently on the website of the Bahrain Freedom Movement, a London-based Shia opposition group fiercely opposed to the Al Khalifa regime. A Bahraini newspaper reported June 7 that Shia opposition political society Al Wifaq secretary general Shaikh Ali Salman met with Interior Minister Shaikh Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa the previous day to discuss the situation. "Informed sources" said the meeting went well and is expected to have a positive impact on the cases.

Extensive Injuries, Per Victim's Brother

¶5. (C) Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS) deputy secretary general Abdullah Al Dirazi told PolOff that his organization had not been able to visit Al Khabaz in the hospital, but Al Dirazi had spoken with Al Khabaz's brother, who had seen him. The brother said that Al Khabaz's injuries were extensive, that he had been beaten and kicked all over his body. BHRS has sent an official letter to the public prosecutor requesting to visit Al Khabaz and Ahmed in jail, but they

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have not yet received a response. Al Dirazi thinks the MOI has a new policy of using increased force against protesters. Police are quick to act, and do not try to defuse the situation through other means. He believes riot police are being more provocative, resulting in an escalating situation of violence and counter-violence.

¶6. (C) BHRS official Abdul Nabi Al Ekry said that he had visited Ahmed at the BDF hospital. He did not see Al Khabaz. Al Ekry said that riot police had employed "heavy handed" tactics for some time, and this incident comes as a result of that policy. There had been expectations that relations between the police and Shia community would improve following the creation of unarmed "community police" personnel drawn from the local population and initiatives to promote dialogue between Interior officials and local leaders, but he said that nothing had really changed. In his view, the MOI considers any group gathering without proper licenses as unauthorized and should be "treated harshly with excessive force." No attempts are made to mediate a peaceful resolution to confrontations, he complained.

Police Crack Down on Protesters

¶7. (C) In the view of secular opposition political society Al Waad president Ibrahim Sharif, the Interior Ministry has a new policy of cracking down on demonstrations. The police do not want to detain people, he said, they want to inflict injuries and present a show of force. Arrests and detentions only lead to more protests, something the government wants to avoid. Citing the case of a May 19 rally in which he was injured by a rubber bullet and a tear gas canister, he said it is true that many of the demonstrations are not legal, but the law is unjust. If a demonstration is inside a village and is not obstructing traffic or business interests, why should the police intervene, he asked.

¶8. (C) Former Shia MP Mohammed Al Shaikh echoed Sharif's

comments, saying that police want to bring pressure to bear on the Shia community, and so they are being aggressive. He commented that the Interior Ministry wants to compensate for the leniency of the King (in recently ordering the case against three Shia activists be dropped) and spread fear and send a strong message to demonstrators. He mentioned that Al Khabaz and Ahmed are associated with the hardline Shia Haq Movement, which seeks to use confrontations with the police to draw public attention and support. He said that Al Khabaz is the nephew of Haq Movement deputy secretary general Abdul Jalil Singace, and he may have been targeted because of his family connection. (Note: No one else has mentioned this reported relationship.) Al Wifaq advisory council member Nizar Al Qari said the police are engaging in "collective punishment." They allow themselves to be attacked, Qari claimed, and then react with excessive force.

¶9. (U) In perhaps another example of the perceived MOI zero-tolerance policy, riot police broke up an illegal gathering in the fishing village of Malkiya June 2. Residents were protesting illegal fish traps in the sea belonging to an "influential citizen." (Note: A senior member of the Al Khalifa family.) According to observers, the situation went suddenly out of control, with police using tear gas and rubber bullets against demonstrators who threw stones and Molotov cocktails. Police reportedly randomly smashed parked vehicles with their batons in the vicinity of the protest. Residents intend to demonstrate again this coming weekend.

Comment

¶10. (C) It is very difficult to sort fact from fiction in a case like this. Everyone who discusses the incident has a stake in convincing the listener of his own point of view. But the lack of transparency from the government and the eight-day period of incommunicado detention raise legitimate questions. The Embassy will continue to follow up with government and civil society contacts.

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